

What is bike share?

Bike share is a program that has hit the streets in several European cities such as Paris, Barcelona, and Brussels. It offers people the ability to “rent” bikes from the numerous bike stations throughout a city and return the bikes at any station. Currently in Paris there are over 200,000 bike trips per day, with 20,000 bikes expected to be on the street by the end of 2007. Cost of use is nominal, with the first ½ hour being free in most cases.

What is your vision for a bike share program in Seattle?

Right now we’re looking at a variety of options in the region. One idea would be to start with a Phase One in South Lake Union where there is a strong need for alternative modes of transportation. With today’s growth, it’s pretty clear South Lake Union (SLU) will have a major traffic and parking crunch in the next few years and bikes on the ground would be a very practical way to get car trips off the streets. Bellevue and Redmond are growing and looking for ways to keep single-occupancy vehicle trips (SOV) off the streets as well.

How would this work?

There are several keys to making a bike share program work. One of those is community support since the bikes do take up space and require drivers to be very alert of the bikes on the street. So far we’ve had great interest and support from key community groups, such as the Cascade Bicycle Club and the Bicycle Alliance of Washington. As we move forward with our request for information (RFI), we will continue to reach out to interested parties in the community. At that point we’ll be discussing more programmatic issues, such as where to place the bike stations.

How would you fund it?

There are several ways to fund a bike share program. In Paris, they rely heavily on street furniture advertising to fund the program. In fact, very little public money has gone into this project. Using street furniture advertising as a funding mechanism keeps user fees low, which encourages ridership. It also helps eliminate the need to appropriate money year over year as part of an annual budget process. At present, we are exploring ways in which we could use minimal advertising plus donations from business and user fees to fund the program over a multi-year period. Our goal would be to use as little public money as possible.

Isn’t advertising restricted in Seattle?

Yes, at present it is restricted. We would have to work with municipalities to determine if these restrictions could be altered to permit some tasteful advertising. In the end, it comes down to a pretty simple equation—does the “cost” of minimal street furniture advertising outweigh the benefits of a positive program like bike share. These restrictions often need to be revisited from time to time to determine if they are hindering advancements in things like transportation.

Who would run the program?

We would look to a third-party operator to run the program, with strong oversight from King County and other agencies. In the end, companies that know bikes and bike share operations are best suited to run a program like this, while at the same time having strong oversight to make certain they meet service and safety standards.

Why is King County involved?

King County is helping spearhead the bike share idea for several reasons. First, as Metro and King County Parks, we have an obvious interest in moving people around the region and getting people out on trails and into our parks. Second, we are interested in seeing bike share programs in the City of Seattle but potentially in other communities, like Redmond, Bellevue, or Burien. One of the keys to having a successful regional bike share system is consistency of experience for the user. In other words, a person would have the same experience—same bike, same marketing materials, same payment system—whether they are in Bellevue or Seattle.

Another reason we are working on this is to achieve an economy of scale that you do not get if you were to build and run the program in a piecemeal fashion. Taking a broad view on how to build and operate a bike share program, and then to replicate it in other areas, can save you significant time and money.

What about safety? Are locks and helmets required?

In many cases, the bikes come with built-in locks, making it very easy to secure a bike. Helmets are not required in other major cities, so that is something we’re talking to the bike community about.